

Golfweek

Famed architect offers taste of Scotland at new golf course in Texas Hill Country

SPICEWOOD, Texas – “Firm and fast is the essence of the game of golf,” [course architect David McLay Kidd](#) said in late October, just days before the official opening to members of his new layout at Loraloma. “That’s what golf is.”

Try to forget for a moment the gorgeous Pedernales River running below Loraloma on its way into Lake Travis near Austin. The scenery is worth the trip to the Lone Star State on its own. Twelve of the holes at Loraloma play along cliffs above the river or the ravines that feed it, and the river is never far from sight. None of that matters much when you’re trying to judge the bounce of a ball across incredibly firm ground with the intent of having it stop near a flagstick.

And don’t let your mind wander to the high-end plans for Loraloma Private Club & Estates as a whole. The 2,200-acre property eventually will include plenty of luxury homesites, with a handful available along the boundaries of the golf course yet never really intruding. The development by Areté Collective will include an eye-popping array of amenities with everything from a marina to a recording studio and eventually a lodge – all of that is yet to come, as even the golf clubhouse hasn’t been started. The golf course came first and – to those of us bedazzled by the game – always will.

In Kidd's ideal of design, golf means having balls land, then do something. The native Scotsman never wants a ball to just plunk down on soft turf and stop. He and his team often roll a basketball along dusty terrain during construction, making sure the ball keeps tumbling. The slopes are then grassed, of course, but the idea remains the same – a golf ball should keep rolling after landing. For Kidd and his crew, golf is a ground game.

“When golf was being played by the Scots 500, 600 years ago, they were not putting this high, arcing golf ball into the air with spin that stopped in two bounces,” Kidd said. “They were using the ground. They were trying to keep it under the wind. They were chasing it along the fairway and into greens, and using subtle contours – or less subtle contours – to get the ball to do their bidding.”

McLay Kidd believes in golf's Scottish roots

Kidd is among the most committed of ground-game devotees who have pushed golf back toward its roots. After several decades of generalized American course design in which an aerial approach and the ability to stop a ball quickly upon landing became en vogue, especially at the highest competitive levels, Kidd has dedicated himself to returning the game to its Scottish ideals.

Starting [at Bandon Dunes in Oregon in 1999](#), Kidd has employed his ground-game ethos at dozens of popular courses such as Gamble Sands in Washington and [its new sister course, Scarecrow](#); at [Mammoth Dunes at Sand Valley](#) in Wisconsin; at the [new GrayBull in Nebraska](#). He's currently [building the fourth full-size course](#) at Streamsong in Florida, a resort first built on the premise of firm and fast conditions across sandy terrain.



“I had a developer that was golf-centric, even though this is a big master-planned community,” Kidd said. “Golf is a small piece of the overall development parcel. ... And they were very keen to let the golf course be the very best it could be. Of course, I went right to the river, and I'm like, ‘I would like to build holes all along this river and across the gulches and diagonals onto peninsulas out into the river.’ And they're like, ‘Great.’ So we did it.”

Loraloma's ground is hard and rocky

But the ground didn't consist of the sand most preferred by many architects. Instead, the terrain is hard and rocky, as expected by anyone familiar with Hill Country. In general, the course was built atop a fairly flat plateau that features gentle elevation changes, the only really steep bits being the sides of the deep ravines. Despite the Hill Country moniker, the course is entirely walkable, the one hindrance to golf on foot being a lengthy transition from the par-3 13th green to the par-4 14th tee – expect most members to be in carts.

It would have been incredibly difficult – and expensive – to move a lot of that crusty earth to introduce more elevation changes, so Kidd leaned on his minimalist tendencies and designed a layout that plays low to the ground. Loraloma features a sea of micro-shaping that partners perfectly with the firm conditions to keep a golf ball rolling, sometimes toward the hole and sometimes away, depending on the player’s skill and strategic thinking.



It begins at No. 1, a mid-length par 4. The green doesn’t look too intimidating from the fairway, guarded by a bunker some 20 yards short and left of the putting surface. But any shot played to the right side of the seemingly innocuous green won’t stay there. A gentle slope will carry the ball farther right and off the green. From wherever the ball eventually stops, it could be a high pitch onto the green, or a bump-and-run with a 6-

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iron, or a long swing of the putter to get the ball back onto the green. A player has options, but the best of them would be to aim left with the approach shot and let the gentle slopes carry the ball into the center of the green.

Such is the case all the way around Loraloma, which might be the most Scottish of all the courses Kidd has built. The new layout plays like many old U.K. or Irish courses built across a plateau before heavy machinery and controlled irrigation were available. The first bounce is everything. Well-traveled players might find reason to compare Loraloma to Nairn Golf Club's Championship Course and its generally flattish seaside holes in Scotland, or even – dare we say – the perfectly ruffled Old Course at St. Andrews, where misguided shots keep rolling and rolling away but a well-planned approach might find a beneficial bounce onto a giant putting surface.

Forced carries make Loraloma a challenge

There's plenty of the idea that "everything is bigger in Texas" included in Loraloma, too. Kidd's 7,400-yard, par-72 routing includes a handful of forced carries, some of them more than 100 yards off the back tees across vegetation-filled gulches. From the more forward tees, the carries shouldn't be too intimidating so long as the player chooses a smart line into a fairway running diagonally away. Such is the case at No. 2, a wide and shortish par 4 that could be drivable for big hitters but where an overly aggressive whack might send the ball into the gunch to the right.

The idea of bigness continues from there, with several fairways expanded to 80 yards wide or more. But those fairways tend to be dotted with bunkers near their centers, and players must choose advantageous lines. A play to the wide side of a bunker might leave a more difficult approach,

while a tee shot into the narrower slice along the opposite side of a trap can set up a perfect line into the green and its surrounding slopes. It's all about risk and reward. The par-5 sixth is a perfect example, playing off the tee into a massive and open fairway that is pinched by a slew of centered bunkers nearer the green that force a player to carefully consider an array of angles.

Throughout a round, the ball keeps tumbling. That was Kidd's plan, and his ideals have been the beneficiary of the talented Stewart Naugler, Loraloma's director of agronomy, who has embraced the fast-and-firm ethos. Loraloma was planted with varieties of hearty zoysia grass wall-to-wall, including the greens, and Naugler has it all dialed in. Zoysia is sometimes considered to be a "sticky" turf, not allowing balls to roll much. But Naugler has employed low heights of cut and a limited irrigation plan like a magician.

Kidd laughed at the start of our round, mentioning that Loraloma might be the first time he has seen a superintendent almost take it too far to keep a ball bouncing. Naugler, watching from his cart, just smiled and said, "No such thing."

If all this emphasis on fast and firm sounds a bit extreme, well, it is. In the best of ways. This is Texas, and these folks never aim to do small. Combine the cliffs, the ravines, the river, the minimalist design that lies perfectly low across the incredibly bouncy terrain, and Loraloma offers an experience that is sure to thrill round after round.

"That experience of returning to the water over and over and the ability to play the ground game, especially in Texas, where it's windy, are all those extra layers that make golf just so much more interesting, so much more of an oil painting rather than paint by numbers," Kidd said. "... My hope is that the members and their friends and guests are going to figure out that the ground game is big. It's part of the absolute essence of it."